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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the teaching of oral communication skills in European modern language instruction. The study had three objectives. The first was to find out if students see foreign language learning as learning to speak a language, by surveying English, Dutch, French, and Austrian schoolchildren. Results suggest that most of the students wish to use the second language for oral communication, enjoy speech practice more than work with any other language skills, and enjoy speech with communicative aspects more than repetitive or formal work. The second objective was to develop simple criteria by which to measure the communicative quality of classroom oral practice. These were drawn from observations and comparisons of: (1) standard oral practice in many classrooms; and (2) characteristics of genuine communication between native and non-native speakers outside the classroom. Materials incorporating the characteristics of genuine communication occurring outside the classroom were also sought out. The third objective was to discover teacher reactions to those materials and their observations of the materials' effects on students. The results are presented and their implications for classroom teaching with the communicative approach are discussed. (MSE)

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The Communicative Approach and Classroom Realities

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This paper represents part of a research project into "Developing Communication Skills in the Modern Language Classroom," investigating the practice of oral communication skills with school pupils aged from 9 to 18.

There are three main reasons for this concentration on oral skills, corresponding to three parts of the research project.

1. There is a wide-spread intuition or impression that pupils see "learning a foreign language" primarily as "learning to *speak* that language". As an initial stage of this project, I sought to test this impression by an open questionnaire to English, Dutch, French and Austrian schoolchildren, on what they LIKE and DISLIKE about learning foreign languages (FLs) in school, and how they would like to USE these languages outside school. The provisional results indicate that around 70% of the 800 learners questioned wish to use FLs for (oral) communication, and furthermore that they enjoy speech practice more than work with other language skills, and speech with communicative aspects more than repetitive or formal work, which they appear to find less relevant to authentic communication outside the classroom. I quote a few of the replies under LIKE:

FRANCE: *Tout ce qui est orale (sauf répétition des phrases), décrire les images, parler on groupe* (Everything oral (except repeating sentences), describing pictures, talking in groups.)

NETHERLANDS: *Nu kan ik mensen die Engels spreken verstaan en eventueel wat terugzeggen* (Now I can understand English speakers and even reply).

AUSTRIA: *Freies sprechen gelernt, Anwendung ausserhalb der Schule* (Have learned to speak freely, useful outside school). And from pupils' remarks under DISLIKE:

ENGLAND: *The textbooks we now use are boring and don't contain the speech part you need to speak to people.*

AUSTRIA: *Fremdsprachen nur, wenn Lehrperson zuhoert, nich mit Nachbarn, Angst, weil ungewohnt.* (Only using the foreign language when teacher is listening, not with partners. Fear, because not used to it) (Pattison, 1986).

II) There is an increasing recognition of the importance of oral communication, as reflected in guidelines for modern languages syllabuses in most European countries (if not yet in all examination syllabuses), and in many Council of Europe publications since the 1970s. The central part of this research project has been to develop simple criteria by which one can recognise the degree of 'communicativeness' in classroom oral practice. The criteria are drawn from a comparison of much standard oral practice in schools and the characteristics of genuine communication between native and non-native speakers outside a teaching situation (i.e. *not* of communication between native speakers). The comparisons are given in LISTS 1 and 2 (from Pattison 1987, pp. 7-8).

LIST 1 *FL oral practice in the classroom*	LIST 2 *FL oral communication outside the classroom*
WHAT: *Content of communication*	
Content or topic is decided by teacher, textbook, tape, etc. The meaning of what they say may not always be clear to the speakers. The content is highly predictable.	Speakers express their own ideas, wishes, opinions, attitudes, information, etc. They are fully aware of the meaning they wish to convey. The exact content of any speaker's message is unpredictable.

LIST 1 *FL oral practice in the classroom*	LIST 2 *FL oral communication outside the classroom*
WHY 1: *Reason for communication*	
Learners speak in order to practise speaking; because teacher tells them to; in order to get a good mark, etc.	Speakers have a social or personal reason to speak. There is an information gap to be filled, or an area of uncertainly to be made clear. What is said is potentially interesting or useful to the participants.
WHY 2: *Result of communication*	
The FL is spoken; the teacher accepts or corrects what is said; a mark is given, etc. (extrinsic motivation)	Speakers achieve their aims; they get what they wanted, an information gap is filled, a problem is solved, a decision is reached or a social contact is made, etc. The result is of intrinsic interest or value to the participants.
WHO: *Participants in communication*	
A large group in which not everyone is facing the speakers or interested in what they say; except for one person, the teacher, who pays less attention to what they say than to how correctly they say it.	Two or more people, usually facing each other, paying attention and responding to what is said, rather than to how correctly it is said.

LIST 1 *FL oral practice in the classroom*	LIST 2 *FL oral communication outside the classroom*
HOW: *Means of communication*	
Language from teacher or tape is very closely adapted to learners' level. All speech is as accurate as possible, and usually in complete sentences. Problems in communication meaning are often dealt with by translation. Learners are corrected if their speech deviates from standard forms, whether or not their meaning is clear. Teachers help leaners to express themselves more correctly.	Native-speaker output is not very closely adjusted to foreigners' level. Meaning is conveyed by any means atthe foreign speakers' command:linguistic or paralinguistic (gestures,etc.). Problems are dealt with by negotiation and exchange of feedback between speakers. Translation is not always possible: Errors not affecting communication are largely ignored. Native speakers help foreign speakers to express themselves more clearly.

An important part of the project was to devise and collect materials which incorporated as many as possible of the LIST 2 characteristics (100% incorporation was by definition impossible within a classroom), and then to refine these with the help of teacher-feedback, initially from Dutch teachers (Pattison 1983 reflects this initial stage). A set of FL oral activities and materials was thus prepared, based on communicative principles, and designed to be both efficient and effective in the classroom (Pattison 1987 contains results of this stage).

III) It is known that, despite the recognised importance motivating effect of communicative oral practice, many teachers find it difficult to use such activities in the average school-classroom. The 'classroom realities' which cause problems here are dealt with in the final (and current) stage of the project. In this, the materials mentioned above (Pattison 1987) are being formally tried out by British FL teachers in West Yorshire middle and high schools.

The aim is to discover teachers' reactions, and their assessment of the effect on pupils. I have not sought to assess the latter directly.

One reason among many for adopting this research design is that, unless such materials meet teachers' perceived requirements, they will simply not be used with pupils in the long term.

The following list represents the problems most frequently mentioned to me by European FL teachers, both within the project, and at various national and international FL teachers' conferences.

LIST 3 *Problems in using the Communicative Approach.*

1 The difficulty of finding motivating tasks and topics for all levels; often associated with unsuitable textbooks.

2 Oral examinations which ignore communicative aspects of language.

3 Colleagues uninterested in the communicative approach.

4 Large classes (so that it is difficult to let everyone speak).

5 Too little time; both for preparation and in class (other parts of the syllabus have to be covered).

6 Learners: (a) With differing abilities, interests and learning styles;
(b) Embarassed or afraid (or far too eager) to speak;
(c) Unwilling to listen to each other.

Group work (which can reduce some of the difficulties listed above) was felt to have its own problems:

7 Discipline: (a) Time-wasting -- some learners do not contribute;

(b) Recalling learners' attention at the end of group-work;

(c) Excessive noise with many learners speaking simultaneously.

8 Language: (a) Learners using the mother-tongue;

(b) Learners making mistakes.

9 Organisation: (a) How to re-arrange the classroom; how to compose the groups;

(b) Insufficient space in class.

Besides sheer administrative difficulties, it is clear that the basic problem of oral communication practice in the classroom is inherent in the nature of oral skills themselves. Listening and speaking, unlike reading and writing, do not give unlimited time for consideration or correction of the language used: yet these are frequently required in much classroom language learning. Moreover, whereas thirty or more learners can read and write individually and in silence, speech practice with the same number is much more difficult to arrange.

Many classroom teacher, not only in Europe, will recognise the problems in LIST 3. (For example, see Ahrens 1986, from India.) The problemn are not universal, however. I found that teachers of English in Catalonia, Spain, did not feel so hampered by inadequate textbooks, unsuitable examinations, or uninterested colleagues. In my formal research in West Yorkshire, more than 80% of teachers of French and German felt positive about the influence of their textbooks and their colleagues, and 48% were positive about the influence of examinations.

It is significant that the Catalonian teachers were all taking part in an extensive re-training and re-organisation programme based on communicative principles, while the British teachers worked in one of the pilot areas for the communicatively-based Graded Objectives in Modern Languages (see Buckby 1981), and the new General Certificate of Secondary Education Examinations (see N.E.A., 1987 for detailed syllabus). Both the Spanish and British teachers were using mostly modern, communicative textbooks.

This illustrates the importance of administrative support and funding (as well as teachers' own commitment) for the initiation and facilitation of new teaching methods and approaches (Fullan, 1982). These factors, however, like the availability of suitable intitial or in-service training, are not usually in the control of the individual classroom teacher. The research project seeks to deal with areas where teachers may be able to exert direct influence to reduce, if not to remove, the problems they encounter. Given the above list of classroom realities as experienced by many teachers: what help can be offered to the *individual* who wishes to adopt a communicative approach in developing oral skills?

In the first place, positive motivation and attitudes -- of both teachers and learners -- are essential, as many studies have shown. Within the project, it is taken as axiomatic that participating teachers are already motivated to try a more communicative approach in their classrooms; they are seeking more help in implementing the approach. The questionnaire results mentioned above under (I) indicate the presence of 'communicative' motivation among learners. With regard to this positive motivation, Naiman *et al* (1978) sum up the position of many other researchers in stating: "... attitude and motivation were in many instances the best overall predictors of success in second language learning...

It is suggested that methods of fostering students' positive attitudes towards their second language learning situation at the earliest possible time be encouraged, otherwise there is a very real possibility that many students will drop out." (In their study they found that the majority of adult learners interviewed also wanted to emphasise speaking and understanding the foreign language.)

Point 1 in LIST 3 above (motivating tasks and topics) is therefore a key item. Teachers need oral activities and materials which convince learners that they are using the language for communication, and not merely as an end in itself. And here, WHAT and WHAY in LIST 2 give the most essential characteristics. Learner' speech must always include some form of personal involvement and have a clear aim. If these requirements are met, then we may expect many of the problems in LIST 3 to be reduced; and teacher feedback so far, on the materials used in this project, appears to support this expectation.

Point 2 (Examinations): European school-leaving FL examinations are, however slowly, shifting towards an emphasis on language as communication (and here teachers have at least an indirect influence). However, whatever the style of the oral examinations, one may expect pupils who are motivated to practise the language intensively are likely to do better than those who are bored and uninterested -- and who may even drop out before they reach the final examination stage (see Naiman, and Buckby *op. cit.*)

Point 3 (Colleagues): Fullan, *op. cit.*, discusses the desirability of co-operation between teachers if changes in traditional practices are to be implemented and continued. Training projects involving complete language departments from schools are clearly desirable here. Changes in national and examination syllabuses often lead to such projects. At an individual level, it can happen that teachers adopting communicative activities and materials find colleagues beginning to show interest, not least because of a noticeable increase in motivation among pupils.

Point 4 (Large classes): Groups (i.e. of about four learners) or pair- work can be successfully used to give all learners in large classes the chance to speak. However, of the West Yorkshire teachers in the project, only 15% reported that they regularly used group-work, though 55% regularly used pair-work. Mitchell and Johnson (1986) observed a British teacher (of French) with long experience of the Communicative Approach, and found 73% of her work was teacher-directed in the whole class, with only 6% pair-work and 2.5% group-work.

Research by Créton and Wubbels (1984) in the Netherlands found that FL teachers used less group-work than teachers of other subjects, and that their lessons were more teacher-dominated. The FL teachers felt the main reason for this was that their subject matter was also and simultaneously the means of communication in their lessons; unlike other subjects in which pupils and teachers can use only their mother-tongue. (There appears to be an unstated implication that pulis cannot adequately communicate with each other in the FL, as suggested in LIST 3, Point 8.). However, FL teachers who regularly use group-work, either on their own initiative or because it is the norm in their school, find great advantages.

These include more co- operation and exchange of ideas between pupils and fewer 'sets' of pupils for the teacher to supervise, as well as greater opportunities and apparent readiness to speak the FL.

The activities suggested to teachers within the project are divided into 3 stages: 1st - demonstration and trial in the whole class, 2nd - practice in class, groups or pairs with guidance from the teacher or book, 3rd - intensive independent practice, introduced when teachers feel that pulis are well-prepared. However, teachers many also reverse or omit stages where they feel this is desirable: for example, independent practice before receiving guidance from the teacher (compare Brumfit 1978).

Many teachers and pupils who are new to the Communicative Approach appear to be helped by a *gradual* reduction of teacher control and guidance, through the three stages, until both parties feel that pupils can achieve independent communication in groups, with largely scripted or largely improvised language.

Point 5 (Time): Group and pair-work automatically saves time in oral practice. With regard to preparation: teachers have not unlimited time to develop new or supplementary materials. Furthermore, as Fullan, *op. cit.*, suggests, their time is more productively spent *using* (rather than making) suitable materials in the classroom. The selected activities/materials in this project had to have any combination of the following characteristics:

-- requiring minimal preparation
-- flexible in the time needed, or the levels at which they can be used, in class
-- compatible with most coursebook contents
-- including ready-made photocopy masters
-- (perhaps most usefully) involving pupils at some stage in creating material

Point 6 (a) (Types of learners): A great variety of communicative tasks is required, which pupils can fulfil at their own level, to meet the needs of various types of learners. Communicative practice must not be simply all guided dialogues and/or free discussions!

Point 6 (b) & (c) (Unwilling to speak or listen): Group-work is helpful, when it is organised so that all pupils must contribute: e.g. a problem-solving activity in which the necessary information is split among group-members (this also helps with Point 7 (a) below). In group role-plays in front of the class, other pupils may be required to draw inferences or extract information from what is said. These and similar points help ensure pupils speak *purposefully*, and *listen* to each other.

Point 7 (a) and (b) (Time-wasting and recalling attention): if pupils can feel that their communicative oral work is useful, relevant and purposeful, then time-wasting is reduced. 100% participation is not always possible -- or necessary. (Many pupils don't contribute in whole-class work either, but this is often overlooked!) It can be difficult to recall pupils attention when the teacher simply says 'You can stop talking now' and pupils have no specific achievement to report or compare with their peers. Communicative tasks can help to reduce this problem. Pupils work together towards a specific aim (scoring points, solving a puzzle, reaching a decision etc.). They then know what they have achieved when the time limit is reached, and both tell and hear what has been achieved or discovered by the class as a whole. The reporting in itself may lead to a further communicative task, between all the groups in a class.

Point 7 (c) (Noise): When group or pair-work is regularly used, pupils learn they can speak more quietly in small face-to-face groups. Furthermore, the 'buzz' or purposeful activity should be not only acceptable but welcome.

Point 8 (a) & (b) (Language use): It appears that pupils are less likely to lapse into their mother-tongue in group practice when they feel the activities are genuinely helping them to practice communicative FL use; and when such activities/material are properly introduced from the beginning of the course, and in stages within each lesson (see Point 4, above). The teachers' and pupils need for some measure of controlled language practice within a communicative approach must be met, because, while the possibility of making mistakes is an essential part of learning, neither group wants actually to practise mistakes, nor to work in a totally unstructured way. The introduction of communicative activities in stages can help here. Teachers can be flexible not only in their use of the stages: they also need to bear in mind that there are basically two types of communicative activity, and that pupils need practise with both:

Type 1 - based essentially on scripted language, such as drills and dialogues, which can be given strong communicative characteristics, e.g. by adding an element of 'secret choice' from given language items (Pattison 1987, pp. 35-36).

Type 2 - based on more improvised language.

Thus, oral work should from the beginning cover both accuracy (in basically scripted speech) as well as fluency (improvised speech), and, particularly in the latter, should include the chance to practise communication strategies. Littlewood, 1984, has a useful brief account of these strategies, while Brumfit, 1984, discusses the roles of fluency and accuracy. It is interesting to see that the N.E.A. French examination syllabus (*op. cit.*) specifically includes the use of communication strategies.

Point 9 (Group organisation) Lack of classroom-space means that groups are fixed by available seating arrangements (e.g. pairs of pupils man simply turn round 180 ^{o} to face those sitting behind them). In other circumstances, groups can be formed, as required, with learners of similar or of different abilities or interests. Teachers report that, where feasible, a variety of approaches works best: neither always fixed nor always changing groups and pairs.

The above is necessarily a very brief account on the work done to date in this project. I would sum up results so far as indicating that, with a variety of materials and activities for oral practice, all based on communicative principles, coupled with suitable class organisation, the Communicative Approach can help both teachers and learners to cope with classroom realities in their oral work.

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